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2-2009

Our University - Lessons of a Struggling Economy

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Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University - Lessons of a Struggling Economy" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 41.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/41

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Our University - Lessons of a Struggling Economy

As the eternal optimist, I have pondered the lessons available in watching the national response to the economic challenges that we face, and how some instruction or, should providence smile on us, some wisdom, might be valuable for our university. There are at least two lessons for our university that fall out of current events.

Universities are a bit like our national government. Both require a mix of public and private participation, but too much of the one and you end up with a centrally controlled system and little attention paid to the individual and the community at the local level.

An overdose of the other leads to the depths of social Darwinism.

Like the federal government the genius, and there is never enough of it, is finding the balance. For the federal government, what can elected officials do in concert with the private sector? For the university, what can the state do in concert with students, alumni, and others who have a dog in the hunt for excellence at our university?

The automobile industry exhibits sluggishness in the face of change, something universities are famous for. In the case of industry, executive leadership only focused on profit is the target of unions only interested in worker protection.

The truth, of course, is balancing these two views. A process of “iron sharpening iron.”

Lesson one, conflicting forces are tools of refinement; strength is squeezed from the intersections of such forces.

Responding to the immediate needs of the market and adjusting to meet those while simultaneously losing long term vision is a danger clearly presented in the current mortgage crunch. What is the purpose of a home mortgage? Is it something that should be available to all no matter the ability to repay? If it is available to all, who decides why one family gets a loan and another does not? Like the university the first cause of action must be up front.

The mortgage industry lost its vision by coming to believe - I would say since the late nineties – that its purpose was to change society through home ownership and generate capital in so doing.

Sorry, that does not get it for me.

Rather the purpose of the mortgage industry is to make available to people who have earned it, the ability to buy an affordable home.

If that changes society, so be it.

Here is the parallel structure for the university. Un- or under-prepared students come for an education and need to borrow to get one, nearly 80% of the undergraduates' at most public institutions. If qualification and ability to repay are absent this is a tragic mistake. The university qualification means academic preparation. A good education loan, as is the case with a good home mortgage, is given to those proven. Students who do not demonstrate a strong persuasion for study and academic work should not be expected to bear the cost of an education that they cannot attain, not for lack of funds, readily available loans have provided that, but for lack of preparation, ability or inclination.

In both cases people lose confidence in the system. They begin to believe that the system has failed them. Actually the system, through lost focus, has failed itself causing non beneficiaries to bear the burden of failure. Both are cases of well intended but misplaced social engineering, every bit as debilitating as unbridled social Darwinism. Agile, focused industry and universities make the world a better place, but only when first causes are attended to.

Lesson two, remember purpose. Free rides are never all they are cracked up to be for our nation or our university.

And they are never free.